DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 698 CS 208 654

AUTHOR Pradl, Gordon
TITLE Narratology: The Study of Story Structure. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 84
CONTRACT 400-83-0025
NOTE 11p.; Provided in both typewritten version and one-page typeset version.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Analysis; Cultural Influences; Elementary Secondary Education; English Instruction; Language Arts; *Learning Theories; Literary Devices; *Narration; *Story Telling
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Narratology; *Story Structure

ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policymakers as well as teachers, this digest discusses the nature of narratology and how it relates to language arts instruction. The digest first defines narratology as the structuralist study of narrative aimed at understanding how recurrent elements, themes, and patterns yield a set of universals that determine the make-up of a story. The digest then discusses the function of stories in human affairs, what structural analysis reveals about the nature of narratives, and how a child's concept of story develops. It also explores how culture affects the interpretation and telling of stories. Finally, the digest explains how the study of narrative relates to teaching and learning in the language arts. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ERIC Digest

ED250698

Narratology: The Study of Story Structure

The telling of stories is such a pervasive aspect of our environment that we sometimes forget that stories provide the initial and continuing means for shaping our experience. Indeed, without stories our experiences would merely be unevaluated sensations from an undifferentiated stream of events. Stories are the repository of our collective wisdom about the world of social/cultural behavior; they are the key mediating structures for our encounters with reality.

Thus, it is not surprising that a great deal of scholarly investigation has focused on both the nature of stories and their central role in human affairs. Across many disciplines--including linguistics, literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, and sociology--researchers have begun to see how the analysis of story structure is fundamental to our understanding of individual intention and potential.

What is narratology?

This rather pretentious label refers to the structuralist study of narrative. The structuralist seeks to understand how recurrent elements, themes, and patterns yield a set of universals that determine the makeup of a story. The ultimate goal of such analysis is to move from a taxonomy of elements to an understanding of how these elements are arranged in actual narratives, fictitious and real.

CS208654

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

The intellectual tradition out of which narratology grew began with the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure. By distinguishing between parole (specific instances of spoken language) and langue (the idealized abstract grammar relating all the specific instances of speech), Saussure initiated "structuralism," the study of systems or structures as independent from meanings, and the field of Semiotics was born (see ERIC Fact Sheet, "Semiotics".) Roman Jakobson and the Russian Formalists also influenced the study of narrative, revealing how literary language differs from ordinary language. Structuralism was further shaped by French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who concluded that myths found in various cultures can be interpreted in terms of their repetitive structures.

What functions do stories play in human affairs?

Although strictly speaking narratology refers only to the particular research of literary critics and anthropologists who study narrative discourse, a concern for narrative penetrates many academic disciplines. Significantly, the words "narrative" and "story" both trace back to an original meaning of "to know." It is through the story that people quite literally come to know--that is, to construct and maintain their knowledge of the world. Through a story an individual creates meaning out of daily happenings, and this story in turn serves as the basis for anticipation of future events.

The psychologist George Kelly has described how our personalities grow out of the stories we have chosen to construct from our perceptions of what has happened to us, and how these stories influence our future expectations. Similarly, sociologist Peter Berger has emphasized the importance of stories in shaping social realities, showing how people's characteristic stories change as they progress from one life theme to another.

What has structural analysis revealed about the nature of narratives?

For one thing, researchers have found that certain underlying narrative structures remain constant, despite the apparently endless diversity of story forms and content. In his study of 100 Russian folk tales, Vladimir Propp found that the same types of actions were being performed (e.g., the hero is transported to another kingdom) even while the personages and details varied greatly (e.g., the hero might be Sucenko or Ivan; the vehicle an eagle, a horse, or a magic ring). In all, Propp identified seven spheres of action and thirty-one fixed elements that fit his sample of stories; and though tales from other cultures reveal additional elements, they too are composed of recurring patterns. Structural analysis, then, uncovers the basic social-psychological tasks that people confront during their lives--issues of dependence or independence, selfishness or sacrifice, birth or death.

For another, structuralists like Todorov, Gerard Genette, and Barthes have given us new ways to look at how stories (novels) are constructed, especially across dimensions of time and narrator. With regard to time, in everyday life a speaker relates events according to normal chronology; but in complex works of fiction, a distinction between "plot" and "story" evolves. The plot in effect reveals the story, rearranging the timeline; and through this the reader "rediscovers" the original events. For instance, in a mystery story two timelines move in opposite directions to keep the reader guessing "whodunnit" until the end.

With regard to narrator, an oral tale normally consists of a speaker telling of past events either from a first person perspective (if the speaker was involved) or from a third person perspective (if the speaker was a mere onlooker). The complicated

modern novel, however, destroys such a neat picture of narrator and voice. Point of view in the modern novel becomes a powerful tool of the author in revealing subtleties of human psychology. Mitchell Leaska, for example, has demonstrated how Virginia Woolf's novels involve a carefully crafted "multiple point-of-view." In sum, narratology has deepened our insights into both the structure of the novel and its origins in primal tales, adding to our store of psychological and social wisdom.

How does a child's concept of story develop?

Arthur Applebee has studied the stories children tell and children's responses to the stories they read. His study shows how a child's idea of a story parallels other cognitive abilities and relates to general growth in ability to take on others' perspectives. Applebee describes six stages in children's event-arrangement, a developmental pattern ranging from "heaps" (mere lists of unrelated perceptions) to "true narratives" (complete events that reveal a theme or evaluation of experience). Other researchers have shown that children in the telling of their own stories gradually develop certain literary conventions ("Once upon a time...") as they grow increasingly sensitive to the overall aesthetic structure of narrative.

Developments that parallel children's storytelling abilities occur in their responses to narratives. While small children have no abstract system for categorizing the stories around them, adolescents begin to differentiate stories on the basis of underlying themes and personal significance. What children are developing here is a mature use of the "spectator role" of language, as James Britton has described it. In reacting to narratives, children grow in their ability to compare their constructs of the world with others', and they learn to question whether their system of expectations is adequate for the future. "Storying," in other words, is central to personal and ethical development.

How does culture affect the interpretation and telling of stories?

Important differences between cultural groups are reflected in their explanatory stories of the universe. Similar events appear radically dissimilar when viewed through the lens of different cultural traditions. For example, Wallace Chafe and his associates showed a short film (in which some youths take pears from a man who has been picking them) to subjects of different nationalities. The result was multiple interpretations and storytelling performances. The response patterns of Americans focused on details and temporal sequencing, while Greeks sought a larger story context and ascribed social motives to the characters. William Labov's research with cultural subgroups revealed not only different story lines in response to a question ("Have you ever been in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?") but also diverse linguistic strategies for stating explanations.

How does the study of narrative relate to teaching/learning the language arts?

Since story forms provide an essential means of organizing material about human behavior and events in the world, teachers should explore narrative with their students. Stories will be a major vehicle of our students' language development. In encouraging their storymaking, along with their personal responses to the stories they read, we are fostering personal and cultural development.

Just as narratology reveals certain universals underlying our stories, it establishes the ground for heterogeneity of values and surface forms, and thus supports pluralism in the classroom. While the broad, outward forms of narrative predominate in the language classroom, narratology is also concerned with how the

individual mind seems to encode information about the world through highly personalized schemata (see ERIC Fact Sheet, "Schemata"). Finally, storymaking provides a natural transition into more formal school writing tasks. The underlying "moral" or point that stories attempt to uncover is what eventually gets transformed into the thesis statement in expository or persuasive essays.

Narratology, then, is fundamentally related to teaching and learning at all grade levels, and even beyond the classroom. From the study of reading comprehension to the building of models of artificial intelligence, the more we understand the nature of narrative, the more we understand ourselves.

Gordon Pradl, New York University

References and Sources for Further Reading

Applebee, Arthur. The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Bergold, Sharon. "Children's Growth of Competence in Storytelling." Language Arts 53(1976): 874-877.

Britton, James. Prospect and Retrospect: Selected Essays. Gordon M. Pradl, ed. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton-Cook, 1982.

Chafe, Wallace L., ed. The Pear Stories: Cognitive, Cultural, and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1980.

Eagleton, Terry. Literary Theory: An Introduction. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1975.

Favat, F. Andre. Child and Tale: The Origins of Interest. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977.

Freedle, Roy O., ed. New Directions in Discourse Processing. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1979.

Kelly, George. The Psychology of Personal Constructs. New York: Norton, 1955.

Labov, William. Language in the Inner City. Philadelphia, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972 (Chapter 9: The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax.)

Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth" Structural Anthropology. New York: Basic Books, 1963.

Leaska, Mitchell A. Virginia Woolf's Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.

Pradl, Gordon M. "Learning How to Begin and End a Story." Language Arts 56(1979): 21-25.

Propp, Vladimir. Morphology of the Folktale. Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1968.

Rouse, John. The Completed Gesture. New York: Skyline Books, 1978.

Schank, Roger. Dynamic Memory: A Theory of Reminding and Learning in Computers and People. New York: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1982.

"Schemata." ERIC Fact Sheet. Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communications Skills, 1983.

"Semiotics." ERIC Fact Sheet. Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1983.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC

A Product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801
1984

This publication was prepared with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-83-0025. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to English language arts specialists for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either the National Council of Teachers of English or the National Institute of Education.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ERIC Digest

Narratology
The Study of Story Structure

The telling of stories is such a pervasive aspect of our environment that we sometimes forget that stories provide the initial and continuing means for shaping our experience. Indeed, without stories our experiences would merely be unevaluated sensations from an undifferentiated stream of events. Stories are the repository of our collective wisdom about the world of social/cultural behavior; they are the key mediating structures for our encounters with reality.

Thus it is not surprising that a great deal of scholarly investigation has focused on both the nature of stories and their central role in human affairs. Across many disciplines—including linguistics, literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, and sociology—researchers have begun to see how the analysis of story structure is fundamental to our understanding of individual intention and potential.

What Is Narratology?

This rather pretentious label refers to the structuralist study of narrative. The structuralist seeks to understand how recurrent elements, themes, and patterns yield a set of universals that determine the makeup of a story. The ultimate goal of such analysis is to move from a taxonomy of elements to an understanding of how these elements are arranged in actual narratives, fictional and nonfictional.

The intellectual tradition out of which narratology grew began with the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure. By distinguishing between *parole* (specific instances of spoken language) and *langue* (the idealized abstract grammar relating all the specific instances of speech), Saussure initiated "structuralism," the study of systems or structures as independent from meanings, and the field of semiotics was born (see ERIC Fact Sheet, "Semiotics"). Roman Jakobson and the Russian Formalists also influenced the study of narrative, revealing how literary language differs from ordinary language. Structuralism was further shaped by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who concluded that myths found in various cultures can be interpreted in terms of their repetitive structures.

What Functions Do Stories Play in Human Affairs?

Although, strictly speaking, narratology refers only to the particular research of literary critics and anthropologists who study narrative discourse, a concern for narrative penetrates many academic disciplines. Significantly, the words "narrative" and "story" can both be traced back to an original meaning of "to know." It is through the story that people quite literally come to know—that is, to construct and maintain their knowledge of the world. *Through a story an individual creates meaning out of daily happenings, and this story in turn serves as the basis for anticipation of future events.*

The psychologist George Kelly has described how our personalities grow out of the stories we have chosen to construct from our perceptions of what has happened to us, and how these stories influence our future expectations. Similarly, sociologist Peter Berger has emphasized the importance of stories in shaping social realities, showing how people's characteristic stories change as they progress from one life theme to another.

What Has Structural Analysis Revealed about the Nature of Narratives?

For one thing, researchers have found that certain underlying narrative structures remain constant, despite the apparently endless diversity of story forms and content. In his study of one hundred Russian folk tales, Vladimir Propp found that the same types of actions were being performed (e.g., the hero is transported to another kingdom) even while the personages and details varied greatly (e.g., the hero might be Sucenko or Ivan; the vehicle an eagle, a horse, or a magic ring). In all, Propp identified seven spheres of action and thirty-one fixed elements that fit his sample of stories; and though tales from other cultures reveal additional elements, they, too are composed of recurring patterns. Structural analysis, then, uncovers the basic social-psychological tasks that people confront during their lives- issues of dependence or independence, selfishness or sacrifice, birth or death.

For another, structuralists like Tzvetan Todorov, Gerard Genette, and Roland Barthes have given us new ways to look at how stories (novels) are constructed, especially across dimensions of *time* and *narration*. With regard to time, in everday life a speaker relates events according to normal chronology; but in complex works of fiction, a distinction between "plot" and "story" evolves. The plot in effect *reveals* the story, often rearranging the timeline; and through this the reader "rediscovers" the original events. For instance, in a mystery story two timelines move in opposite directions to keep the reader guessing "whodunnit" until the end.

With regard to narration, an oral tale normally consists of a speaker telling of past events either from a first-person perspective (if the speaker was involved) or from a third-person perspective (if the speaker was a mere onlooker). The complicated modern novel, however, destroys such a neat picture of narrator and voice. Point of view in the modern novel becomes a powerful tool of the author in revealing subtleties of human psychology. Mitchell Leaska, for example, has demonstrated how Virginia Woolf's novels involve a carefully crafted "multiple point-of-view." In sum, narratology has deepened our insights into both the structure of the novel and its origins in primal tales, adding to our store of psychological and social wisdom.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

How Does a Child's Concept of Story Develop?

Arthur Applebee has studied the stories children tell and children's responses to the stories they read. His study shows that a child's idea of a story parallels other cognitive abilities and is related to general growth in ability to take on others' perspectives. Applebee describes six stages in children's event-arrangement, a developmental pattern ranging from "heaps" (mere lists of unrelated perceptions) to "true narratives" (complete events that reveal a theme or evaluation of experience). Other researchers have shown that children in the telling of their own stories gradually develop certain literary conventions ("Once upon a time . . .") as they grow increasingly sensitive to the overall aesthetic structure of narrative.

Developments that parallel children's storytelling abilities occur in their responses to narratives. While small children have no abstract system for categorizing the stories around them, adolescents begin to differentiate stories on the basis of underlying themes and personal significance. What children are developing here is a mature use of the "spectator role" of language, as James Britton has described it. In reacting to narratives, children grow in their ability to compare their constructs of the world with others', and they learn to question whether their system of expectations is adequate for the future. "Storying," in other words, is central to personal and ethical development.

How Does Culture Affect the Interpretation and Telling of Stories?

Important differences among cultural groups are reflected in their explanatory stories of the universe. Similar events appear radically dissimilar when viewed through the lenses of different cultural traditions. For example, Wallace Chafe and his associates showed a short film (in which some youths take pears from a man who has been picking them) to subjects of different nationalities. The result was multiple interpretations and storytelling performances. The response patterns of Americans focused on details and temporal sequencing, while Greeks sought a larger story context and ascribed social motives to the characters. William Labov's research with cultural subgroups revealed not only different story lines in response to a question ("Have you ever been in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed?") but also diverse linguistic strategies for stating explanations.

How Does the Study of Narrative Relate to Teaching/Learning the Language Arts?

Since story forms provide an essential means of organizing material about human behavior and events in the world, teachers should explore narrative with their students. Stories will be a major vehicle of our students' language development. In encouraging their storymaking, along with their personal responses to the stories they read, we are fostering personal and cultural development.

Just as narratology reveals certain universals underlying our stories, it establishes the ground for heterogeneity of values and surface forms, and thus supports pluralism in the classroom. While the broad, outward forms of narrative predominate in the language classroom, narratology is also concerned with how the individual mind seems to encode information about the world through highly personalized schemata (see ERIC Fact Sheet, "Schemata"). Finally, storymaking provides a natural transition into more formal writing tasks. The underlying "moral" or point that stories attempt to uncover is what eventually gets transformed into the thesis statement in expository or persuasive essays.

Narratology, then, is fundamentally related to teaching and learning at all grade levels, and even beyond the classroom. From the study of reading comprehension to the building of models of artificial intelligence, the more we understand the nature of narrative, the more we understand ourselves.

Gordon Pradl, New York University

Resources

Applebee, Arthur. *The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Bergold, Sharon. "Children's Growth of Competence in Storytelling." *Language Arts* 53 (1976): 874-77.

Britton, James. *Prospect and Retrospect: Selected Essays.* Gordon M. Pradl, ed. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton Cook, 1982.

Chafe, Wallace L., ed. *The Pear Stories: Cognitive, Cultural, and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production.* Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1980.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975.

Favat, F. Andre. *Child and Tale: The Origins of Interest.* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977.

Freedle, Roy O., ed. *New Directions in Discourse Processing.* Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1979.

Kelly, George. *The Psychology of Personal Constructs.* New York: Norton, 1955.

Labov, William. "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax." In *Language in the Inner City.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." In *Structural Anthropology.* New York: Basic Books, 1963.

Leaska, Mitchell A. *Virginia Woolf's Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.

Pradl, Gordon M. "Learning How to Begin and End a Story." *Language Arts* 56 (1979): 21-25.

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

Rouse, John. *The Completed Gesture.* New York: Skyline Books, 1978.

Schank, Roger. *Dynamic Memory: A Theory of Reminding and Learning in Computers and People.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

"Schemata." ERIC Fact Sheet. Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1983.

"Semiotics." ERIC Fact Sheet. Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1983.

ERIC

A Product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801
1984

This publication was prepared with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-83-0025. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to English language arts specialists for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either the National Council of Teachers of English or the National Institute of Education.